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ABSTRACT

Early childhood (ECE) programs should reflect the diversity of the populations and cultures for which they are designed. For example, there are varieties of support for early childhood education in the United States, where a basic distinction is made between programs for education and programs for child care. While some may believe that the alliance between the fields of ECE and child development is immutable and uniform, in reality programs differ in theories of development and educational ideology. Kohlberg and Mayer identified three educational ideologies that reflect different developmental theories: a romantic ideology reflecting a maturational view; a cultural transmission ideology reflecting a behavioral view; and a progressive ideology reflecting an interactionist, constructivist view. Although for many years the romantic ideology was associated with most preprimary programs, at present, ECE program in the United States are characterized by a cultural transmission ideology or a progressive ideology. It is well to keep in mind that while programs for young children should be developmentally appropriate, they should also be worthwhile educationally. The starting place for educational program development should be a value statement on what children ought to be and become. Implications for educational practice and teacher education are discussed. (RH)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN AMERICA:

CONSISTENCIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

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The field of early childhood education reflects a number of contradictions: While it has developed as an international movement; in fact, programs of early childhood education are nation- and culture-specific. While it builds on a view of the natural development of children, and programs are supposed to reflect and respond to the nature of children and childhood; in fact, it consists of contrived learning settings and had invented educational methods, materials and activities that are far from natural. While the field continually articulates the importance of the parents in the education of young children; in fact it generally excludes parents by mystifying practice and limiting practice to those with professional credentials. Other contradictions exist as well.

The most basic contradiction might be: that while early childhood education represents a single unified field; in fact, the practice of early childhood education is set in diverse programs and services for young children -- programs that might have very different goals and even different primary clients.

In my own country,the United States, early childhood education includes primary and kindergarten education as well as preschool or nursery education. We have child care centers and child care homes. We have parent-child programs that serve children and their parents in their homes, as well as center programs that serve children outside their homes. We have programs for normal children, for handicapped children, for children at-risk of educational failure, for children from low income families, and children whose primary language is not English. While some programs are primarily educational, others are mainly concerned with caring for or 'minding' children. Some programs attend to the nutrition, health and social and emotional needs of children; while others do not.

Early childhood education programs in America are supported in many ways. Some are sponsored by the public schools, some by other government agencies, some by nongovernmental community agencies, and some by private entrepreneurs and corporations. These programs may or may not charge their clients fees. Some private agencies operate programs for a profit -- they expect a financial return on their investment; others operate on a not-for-profit basis, with the cost of the programs subsidized by individuals or government.

Given this range of programs, it is hard to conceive of early childhood education as a single unitary field. In fact, often a distinction is made between child care programs and education programs. Some early educators even wonder whether

attention to health and nutrition ought to be included in early educational programs and whether programs designed primarily for children should be distinct from those designed primarily for their parents.

In spite of all the diversity, there are consistencies within early childhood education. One consistency is that all the programs serve children in their period of early childhood -- from birth through age 8. Another is that the programs are all concerned with supporting the optimal development of young children, though each program might not be concerned with all realms of development.

Perhaps, in dwelling too much on the commonalities, we create generalizations that limit our conceptions of the field. We create slogans which serve political purposes when we need concepts that illuminate our conceptual understanding. The use of slogans, such as "Play is the work of the child" or "we build programs on the needs and interests of the children" often hide the true nature of play, or the basis used for program development.

The concern for "developmental appropriate educational practices" heard in America reflects the use of such a slogan that has confused rather than clarified issues. Rather than judge programs on developmental appropriateness alone, we need to identify their educational worth. We should be concerned with what type of early childhood program is appropriate for each

particular child population in each society and in each community.

The purposes and goals of programs need to be particular to the population and the culture for which it is designed rather than generalizable to all. The structure, content and the kinds of personnel needed will differ from one programs to another - and this is not necessarily a bad thing. The programs might be identified by service, by sponsor, by delivery system and by personnel involved. Let me discuss program provision in the United States, along with program content and program personnel to demonstrate what I mean.

Provision of program

In China, for example, there is no distinction between child care programs and kindergarten programs for children three to six; kindergartens there operate on a full day basis. While children are educated in these programs; they are also fed, given opportunities for rest, provided with medical and dental services, and offered whatever is necessary for the nurturance of the young. In contrast, distinctions are made between programs for education and for child care in America.

Public schools essentially offer educational programs. Primary education for children from about age 6 is universal; with a school year of 180 days and school day of 5-6 hours in length. Traditionally kindergartens have been provided for five-year-old children in half day programs.

The half-day kindergarten developed from the earlier practice of having kindergarten teachers work with children only in the morning, so that their afternoons could be dedicated to work with parents. Home visits, parent education classes, counseling, and other parent activities were part of the kindergarten teachers responsibilities. As public schools withdrew from parent education, kindergarten teachers were give two classes of children per day, or reduced to half-time teachers.

Presently the number of full day kindergarten programs in American public schools is increasing. Full day here means full school day (9:00 am to 3:00 pm, for example), rather than the extended day of child care programs.

Interestingly, when nursery schools were first established for children ages three to seven in England, they operated on a full school day basis. Yet, most nursery schools in America in recent years offered half day programs to children prior to entrance to kindergarten.

Kindergarten education for 5-year-olds has become universal, with the overwhelming majority of the children in public school. Educational programs for 3- and 4-year-olds are becoming increasingly available in public schools. But often, programs for the under 5's are limited to special populations (e.g., handicapped children, or children at-risk of later educational failure). Recently our federal government has mandated that schools provide education for handicapped children from birth.

Programs for children age 0-2 are to be home based, while programs for children 3-5 will be school based. States who do not now provide such education are developing plans for such provision.

While in America the situation in relationship to the care and education of young children is improving, we still seriously lag in the area of child care facilities. We need to create more home based and center based programs. We need to improve the quality of existing programs. We also need to make child care more universally available. We need to offer school programs that provide more than education. Public authorities are less willing to do this.

Unlike educational programs, which are mainly in the public sector, child care programs in the United States are mainly in the private sector. This limits the quality of service, for good child care is expensive. At least partly the result of this sponsorship, child care workers are among the lowest paid persons in the work force in America. There is a high turnover of personnel in centers and an increasing shortage of qualified child care workers.

Unfortunately, even the most expensive child care services may not be of high quality, for not all of the fees are spent on the children. Child care has increasingly come to mean minimal care. Adequate educational programs too often are lacking in child care centers. Other needs of children and family (e.g.,

child health, family service) may not be adequately provided for, either.

At present there is a debate raging on the role of our national government in support of child care services. We may be at the brink of a new era in which the United States government assumes a major role and stimulates state governments to provide early childhood services and establish reasonable standards for the care and education of young children. Unfortunately, our President has announced that the Congressional bill in support of child care services is a "candidate for a veto." During the Nixon administration a bill in support of child care was vetoed by our president, never to surface again. Thus, whether or not we will actually see a major shift in national legislation in support of child care is yet to be determined.

What should be the content of early education?

In the beginning of the 20th century, the field of Early Childhood Education became entwined with the field of Child Development. As a result of this alliance, there evolved a belief that these two fields are inseparable -- that early childhood education programs are merely the application of child development research and theory. For a long time, preprimary programs reflected the "child development point of view."

In reality, there is no single theory of human development that is accepted by all developmentalists or by all educators and thus no single "child development point of view." Kohlberg and

Mayer, some years ago, identified three educational ideologies that reflect different developmental theories: a romantic ideology which reflects a maturational view, a cultural transmission ideology which reflects a behavioral view, and a progressive ideology which reflects an interactionist / constructivist view.

For many years, the romantic ideology was associated with most preprimary programs. In contrast, the cultural transmission ideology is associated with programs for older children. What at one time was called the "child development point of view" was a romantic, maturational conception of development. This view is still reflected in some early childhood educational policies and practices. For example, children may be given a developmental test before admission into kindergarten. The recommendation to admit the child immediately or to postpone admission will be based upon these test results. A child who scores low, and is thus considered lagging in development, will be asked to stay out of school in order to "ripen" for an additional year.

Similarly, the decision to retain a child who is not performing well for an extra year of kindergarten, rather than have the child move on to first grade, assumes that the additional year of maturation will help the child meet school expectations. This maturational perspective is also reflected in the concept of readiness used by some early childhood teachers. Children will be expected to have achieved a mental age of six years, six months, for example, or until the child demonstrates

abilities associated with reading, before being placed in a reading program. This is in contrast to giving the child a series of experiences that are designed to move the child towards reading.

Since the 1960s, we have seen the development of alternative program models reflecting different educational ideologies and thus different developmental theories. There is no single educational program that derives for any developmental theory. Rather, many different programs models can be generated that are consistent with each developmental theory.

Each curriculum model is characterized by the specific way in which educational elements are conceived and integrated: what we want children to learn (goals and content), how we expect children to learn (methods of instruction), as well as organizational principles (use of time, space and materials), and how the teacher's role is conceived.

Presently, early childhood programs in America are characterized by either a cultural transmission ideology or a progressive ideology. While some educational practices reflect a maturational outlook, teachers seldom refer to maturational theory to support these practices. Such educational practices, including those related to the admission and retention of children in kindergarten, as I noted earlier, and those related to noninterventionist teacher practices in prekindergarten (that is, when teachers set the stage but do not intervene in children's activities), reflect a romantic-maturational ideology.

Many early childhood educators in America are concerned that, as younger children have been admitted into the public schools, educational practices that are appropriate to older children are being applied to young children. The elementary education tradition of telling children what we want them to learn, a form of cultural transmission, is being used in place of an activity-oriented approach to learning that would be designed to help children construct their own knowledge. Too often, young children are being taught academic skills through direct instruction. The content may be inappropriate for young children, as well as the method of teaching, -- the use of paper and pencil activities, and workbooks or worksheets -- rather than through the reconstruction of personal experience through constructive learning activities. In addition, teaching may be limited to the basic academic skills. It is the narrowing of the range of knowledge included in the curriculum as much as the use of direct instruction as a teaching method that has led to a call for more developmentally appropriate programs in early childhood education.

Unfortunately, we do not hear this call being applied to other forms of developmentally inappropriate early childhood activities. In too many preschools children are bored. Too often they are provided with stereotypic activities to keep them busy throughout the day, rather than to educate them. Too often teachers do not design and implement activities that will challenge children, excite them, and extend them. Too many early

childhood teachers lack the ability, or the knowledge, or the willingness to extend and restructure children's play. These teachers do not create the cognitive dissonance or conflict needed to move children to higher stages of development: a progressive goal of education. The fact that early childhood educators in America vehemently oppose one type of developmentally inappropriate program -- that is, providing content and methods more suitable for older children -- but remain silent about the other type -- that is, limiting children's experiences and encounters with the world and avoiding growth-generating stimulation -- is another contradiction within our field.

While programs for young children need to be developmentally appropriate, they also need to be educationally worthwhile. We need to pay attention to what we are teaching young children as well as the level at which we are teaching them and the kinds of activities that are used as a vehicle for learning.

Although developmental theory can be viewed as a resource to the early childhood curriculum, it is inappropriate to conceive of it as its basic source. The two other resources that are equally important: (1) the level of technology of a society, and (2) society's cultural values. Barbara Biber has suggested that the starting place for developing any educational program "should be a value statement of what children ought to be and become."

There is a standard set of values that underlies most early childhood education programs in America just as there is a

standard content to these programs. Unfortunately, neither of these are made explicit. There seems to be, however, an implicit agreement among early childhood educators about what knowledge is to be transmitted to young children in kindergarten. Standard American early childhood programs teach about the American way of life, about the English language, about America, and about American values and attitudes. The day-to-day curriculum experiences offered in early childhood programs relate to the American way of life. The knowledge we want young children to acquire about that way of life is embedded in the books we read to them, the stories we tell, the songs we sing, the experiences we offer, and the relations we nurture among children and between children and adults.

One of the most important elements of all early childhood programs is language. Literacy education for young children is being viewed as increasing significance. However, literacy skills are only part of the language learning provided to young children. We teach about the content, structure and function of the American language to both bilingual and monolingual children. We also share rich oral and written traditions of children's literature and poetry, folk stories, and fairy tales.

Many of the holidays we celebrate with children in school -- Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, President's Day, Martin Luther King Day, and so on -- relate to American history and American traditions. These are celebrated in school to instill a sense of American peoplehood. These celebrations and the learning related

to them help all children, whatever the cultural background and cultural heritage, develop a sense of identity with the American culture, while not necessarily denying their own personal family background and culture. While these elements are an implicit part of our early childhood education programs, because they are unarticulated, they are - unfortunately - unstudied.

Since ours is a pluralistic society, made up of many ethnic, cultural and racial groups, many subcultures contribute to the cultural base of the school curriculum at every educational level. While there is much that we all must learn in common with one another, there is great diversity in what individual groups might want their children to know. A balance must be struck in the schools between having all children learn things in common and having alternative goals and content for children as individuals and as members of different ethnic, geographic and cultural groups. The fact of our multiculturalism requires that we learn about other cultures as well as our own, so that the common core of cultural knowledge we want young children to gain should include knowledge representative of minority as well as majority cultures.

The "what" of our early childhood education is determined by our culture, by the nature of the knowledge we wish children to acquire and by the nature of the human being we wish to be the result of our education. Other cultures and other countries provide early childhood education programs that are similar to those in the United States in superficial ways. Only now are we

beginning to look at curriculum differences - both the implicit and explicit curriculum -in a cross-national perspective. I have written and spoken elsewhere about kindergartens in China and the importance of "lessons" in their curriculum. Recently, Lois Peak described some of the differences between American and Japanese kindergartens. Her work focuses on the socializing aspects of the kindergarten. The way in which teachers deal with critical incidents -- responding to problems of separation from parents, or teaching children the value of group activity in Japan and of individual activity in the United states, for example -- provides a form of curriculum development as well.

Perhaps in providing activities for young children and in developing early childhood curriculum, we are too consistent. The period of the 1960s was one in which a number of alternative models were developed. These models have their place in history. Unfortunately, alternative approaches to curriculum can seldom be found in the ongoing programs that can be seen in America. It might be good to resurrect some of these older alternative curriculum models and to generate some new ones as well.

The provision for teachers

As early childhood education evolved in the United States, the differences in programs led to differences among early childhood teachers. Preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers and primary grade teachers have segregated themselves into distinct groups. Teachers of special populations of children,

such as the handicapped, are also separated from teachers of normal, mainstream children. The differences among these groups of teachers reflect different interests, different teaching tasks, and even different ideologies.

These differences, while profound, are small when compared to the major split among early childhood teachers based upon program sponsorship. This difference will probably make it increasingly more difficult to merge practitioners into a single professional group. This difference is between teachers in public school programs and teachers in nonpublic school programs.

We have two tiers of early childhood teachers. At the top are early childhood teachers in public school programs. They are generally required to have state teaching certificates. They have at least bachelors degree qualifications, and sometimes higher degrees. They have relatively high annual salaries and work a school year of nine to ten months. They also receive sick leave, retirement, health insurance, and life insurance. Their jobs are secured by tenure and they often spend many years teaching in the same school or school system.

The second group are early childhood teachers in the private sector, especially those in child care centers. These teachers are required to have much lower qualifications. They seldom need state teaching certificates; their minimum requirements are often embedded in state regulations for preschool centers. Some of these teachers will have similar qualifications to public school teachers. Most often, they will have completed one or two year

programs in a community college or a high school level vocational programs. Some will actually have no formal preparation at all.

The Child Development Associate credential was established as a way of setting preparation and performance standards for these practitioners. It started as a credential for the Head Start program, but was generalized to be applicable for child care practitioners as well. Unfortunately, only a small minority of child care and other preschool practitioners currently possess that credential.

Salaries are also significantly lower for early childhood teachers in the private sector. Many are paid on an hourly basis and what they earn is at or near the legal minimum wage. They seldom are provided with sick leave, health insurance or retirement benefits. There is a high teacher turnover, with many preschools reporting an annual rate of 100% or more.
While some early childhood educators have suggested a career ladder approach to the preparation of early childhood teachers -- with novices starting at lower levels of practice, as aides or teacher assistants, then moving to more professional levels, through a combination of experience and additional training -- few practitioners who start at the bottom of the ladder actually succeed in becoming certified early childhood teachers, or supervisors or administrators, in this way.

We, in America, need to address the disparity in the levels of qualification and preparation within early childhood education. We also need to find ways to provide adequate

financial compensation for qualified teachers in all early childhood settings. Child care teachers should know at least as much as kindergarten or primary grade teachers about education -- and much more about child health, nutrition and family structures. Those who are well qualified should be paid at least as well

New reforms in teacher education have been proposed in the United States. Reformers are suggesting that we set higher standards of qualification for teachers. Mostly, these reformers are suggesting increases in the general education of teachers rather than improvements in their professional preparations. Some reformers suggest that schools and colleges or universities strengthen their collaboration in the preparation of teachers. Many advocate a minimum of five years of post-secondary preparation for teachers.

While these proposals may ultimately improve our schools by providing them with better educated teachers, they do not necessarily address the needs of early childhood programs. In fact, there may be two negative consequences of these reforms. They may increase the social distance between early childhood teachers in the public schools and those in private preschools, especially in child care centers. Public school teachers will have even higher levels of qualification and possibly higher salaries. Because it will take longer to become a teacher under the suggested reforms, and because additional scholarships are not being provided for teachers in training, it will be harder

for individuals from lower socioeconomic strata of our nation to become teachers. The consequence of this may be to lessen social mobility for these individuals, since it will be more difficult to become teachers. For a long time, teaching has been an avenue for social mobility. Raising the standards of entry could change this, with serious consequences for members of minority groups in America. The changes brought about in teacher preparation and certification by these suggestions for reform might reduce the proportion of teachers in schools from underrepresented minority groups, who tend to be more often in these lower socioeconomic strata.

Early childhood educators need to assess the challenges of the teacher education reform movement and see how reforms can become more reflective of the specific needs of programs for young children. We need to ask: Does having an advanced degree mean that a teacher will be better able to provide for the educational needs of young children? We also need to recruit more teachers of young children and seek ways to lower the turnover of teachers in the private sector, especially in child care centers. We need to ask: How can we improve early childhood teachers' job satisfactions and compensation? As long as teachers salaries are primarily provided out of children's fees, there will be a constant struggle between the need for adequate teachers salaries and fees that allow most families access to early childhood services.

Conclusion

There are serious contradictions facing the field of early childhood education in the United States. These contradictions arise from the commitments of our society and the ways in which we have organized institutions to meet those commitments. They also arise from the fact that our educational enterprise is an advanced one.

As we move into the twenty first century, we will need to find ways of resolving the contradictions we find. We need to maintain our commitment to equity and to services for young children. We also need to find ways in which we can better serve young children: providing better, more accessible, more comprehensive programs that are staffed by well-qualified personnel.